

Remarks of Dean Ken Davis
9/6/06

At the University of Wisconsin Law School, we pride ourselves on being the home of something called “Law in Action. It recognizes that the lawyer’s job only begins – not ends – with identifying the governing law on the books. Whether in our classrooms, our clinics, our seminars and extra-curricular activities, we strive to teach our students that in a world in which considerable discretion and judgment attends the decision of which cases to file, whether and when to settle, and how – and whether it is right – to plan around the existing rules, the lawyer needs to be ever sensitive to the larger context if he or she is to serve clients well. We believe this approach unifies and reinforces our teaching, scholarship and service, and makes each of them more powerful and more relevant.

I offer these observations here because if there ever was a contest to identify the person whose career best embodies the values of law in action, few could rival our honoree. Shirley Abrahamson’s association with our School began in the mid-1950s when she was a graduate student under the preeminent legal historian, Willard Hurst, and she quickly established her bona fides as a legal scholar. Her doctoral dissertation was an ambitious analysis of the law’s role in controlling the quality of Wisconsin dairy products, and still serves as a valuable case study of how historical events and contemporary needs shape the law’s direction.

Shortly thereafter, the Chief became a member of our faculty and taught tax law to almost a generation of law students, no doubt many present today. But she was never content simply to view the law from afar. She insisted on practicing what she preached, literally, as a member of the LaFollette firm. This valuable combination of scholarly detachment and real-world practicality well qualified her for judicial service, and fortunately for all of us, Governor Lucey recognized it. As an Associate then Chief Justice, Shirley Abrahamson has not only brought her considerable skills and energy to helping develop the law consistent with the state’s progressive tradition, but used her office as a bully pulpit to regularly remind all of us in the legal profession about our obligation to serve others.

Chief Justice Abrahamson, on behalf of all your many friends at the University of Wisconsin Law School, it is a great pleasure to join you in celebrating this special day. You will always be not only one of our most esteemed graduates, but also one of our most cherished colleagues.